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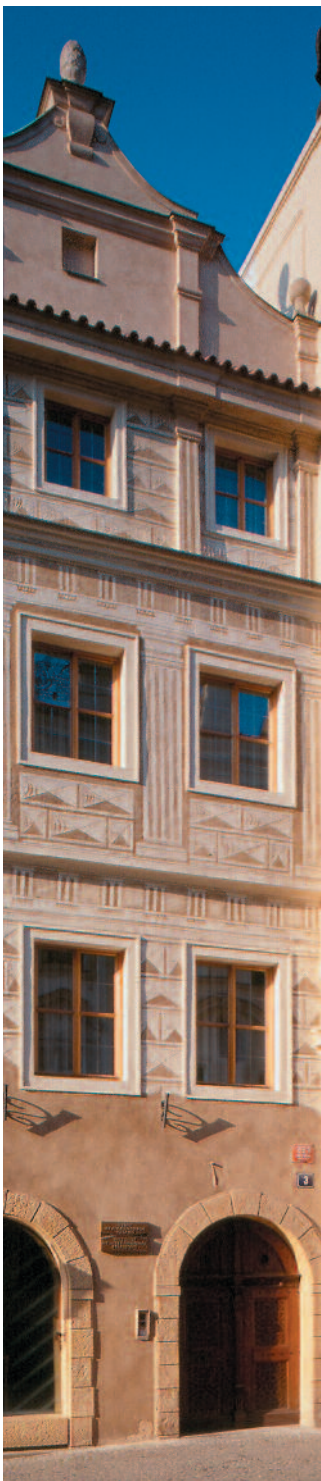
To Catch a Fogle



SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Putin regime seems to have chosen to publicly expose Ryan Fogle not simply as a "tit-for-tat" for the embarrasing release of footage by the FBI of the meetings of "illegals" detained in the U.S. (2010) with Russian diplomats, but to gesture toward domestic audiences and to humiliate the U.S. in order to weaken its position in mutual negotiations, knowing that Washington may not be in the position to retaliate.

For the EU, the episode is a reminder that even in the age of cyber threats the conventional spy war is far from over.

The scene was reminiscent of the Cold War, and the script – for indeed there was a script – could have come straight from one of John Le Carré's novels. Only now, the part of the poor Jim Pridaux, lured into a trap in the woods of Communist Czechoslovakia where he had been led to believe he would learn the identity of the MI6 "mole" from a defecting general in Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy (1974), was assumed by Ryan Fogle, a U.S. diplomat at the Moscow embassy presumably on the CIA payroll.

The time was midnight, the place Akademik Pilyugin Street. Fogle was out to meet a Russian counter-terrorism officer specialising in the North Caucasus. He had made some effort to lose any tail there could have been at leaving the embassy. In the end, it was futile – it appears to have been his very contact who struck him to the ground as the

FSB (Russia's internal security agency) officers swarmed around. The rest is video footage, circulated and endlessly rebroadcast on state television networks: the transport to Lubyanka, detailed shots of Fogle's periphernalia (including improbable ones like compass or a letter that reads, as some have pointed out, like a Nigerian email scam), and the visit at the notorious FSB headquarters by three other embassy staffers, filmed silently listening while a Russian official reviews Fogle's alleged actions.

When a recruitment operation by foreign intelligence is compromised, the targeted government generally has three options. First, it can unceremoniously return the agent to the country of origin, declaring him a persona non grata. A U.S. diplomat posted to in Russia identified by the FSB as "Benjamin Dillon" may have suffered such fate as recently as January. Second, it can try to convince the agent that (s)he has succeeded. This way it can pocket the money, gain insight into the foreign service's knowledge and operational procedures, and possibly even feed it disinformation. Third, it can opt for a public exposure.

What could have been the Kremlin's motivations for choosing the last option? Having limited insight into the background and relying on open sources alone, there is no knowing for sure. That said, a contextual analysis may go some way in suggesting possible explanations predicated on the assumption that since the decision was made by the top brass (as commentators seem to agree), it was based on President Putin's regime rational calculation of what best serves its interests.

The first context to consider is domestic. The spectacularity of the event and the mass reproduction of the released material (the footage and two intercepted phone calls placed by Fogle before his arrest) suggest that at least at one level this was a rhetorical gesture directed at domestic audiences. At the time when Putin seems to find it more and more difficult to hold to his unchallenged status vis-ą-vis the society but increasingly, given the former's pacification in the aftermath of the last year's protests, also the greedy political class, such gesture, aiming at disciplining those key constituencies, mimics the familiar: unveiling foreign enemies sewing discontent in Russian society, the stability of which only Putin can now guarantee. It is not implausible that the unlikely props were thrown in to make sure the spectacle was more easily intelligible, while at the same time ridiculing the U.S. by suggesting its tradecraft was primitive (the clownish appearance of the story's protagonist, courtesy of the shaggy blond wig, also did its part).

Second, the link to the North Caucasus deserves mentioning. It is reasonable to believe that the recent Boston attacks were behind the recruitment attempt – despite the fact that the Tsarnayev brothers' radicalisation most likely had nothing to do with their family roots in the region or Tamerlan's visit there in 2012. (Neither in their choice of target nor rationalisation for their terrorist act Tsarnayevs appear to have subscribed to the Caucasian emirate's regional cause. And given Tamerlan's unfamiliarity with the local

social environment, he was extremely unlikely to get access to the "globalist" Salafi jamaats.) That would suggest that Washington has been less than satisfied with the assistance received from Moscow following the bombings. But it might also be concerned about the safety of U.S. athletes at the Sochi Olympics (2014) the budget for which has been plundered by local "businessmen". Moscow, in its turn, could adorn the public ritual condemning of the fact that someone could be even thinking of spying in Moscow by "hurt feelings" that this happened just as it had lent hand with Boston attacks investigations, thus reinforcing the message of Washington's duplicity. Moreover, while deciding how to handle the situation the subject of Fogle's interest reduced the benefits of proceeding according to the second scenario (simulating operational success): had he been interested in Russian new weapons technologies, the stakes would have been different.

Why would the Kremlin humiliate Washington just at the time when it may make the latter endorse with much more ease the (dubious) narrative of the North Caucasus as a a battlefield in the global war on terror it had been promoting for years, and perhaps even assist in the crackdown on the North Caucasus insurgents' financing from diasporas around the world? Perhaps because it feels it can.

The Kremlin may see itself as playing upper hand in the mutural relations lately, interpreting Washington's policy (rational and composed, but perhaps somewhat lacking in strategic vision) as one of appeasement and desperate seeking of mutual cooperation. President Obama's "reset" can finally be proclaimed dead without ever producing significant results. Washington has recently reviewed the missile defence plans (EPAA) in a way that can make Moscow pleased (i.e., scrapping the project's fourth and final phase aimed at deploying capabilities to intercept intercontinental ballistic missiles). Most importantly, the U.S. administration is increasingly keen on enlisting assistance of Russia (which has been lending diplomatic and military support to the Assad regime) in resolving its conundrum of how to end the civil war in Syria without empowering rebels linked to Al-Qaeda or merely preparing grounds for future conflict of various violence enterpreneurs among the resistance (witness the international conference to be convened based on agreement between Foreign Ministers Kerry and Lavrov during the former's recent visit to Moscow).

For the Kremlin, the "Foglegate" may be thus well be a part of the psychological game it plays with Washington (another being its calculated ambivalent position on whether it will provide sophisticated S-300 air defense systems to the Assad regime). In other words, seizing on the opportunity created by perhaps a too aggressive case officer, and with limited benefit in pretending that the recruitment has been successful, the Putin regime may have chosen the public exposure not simply as a "tit-for-tat" for the embarrasing release of footage by the FBI of the meetings of "illegals" detained in the U.S. (2010) with Russian diplomats, but to 1) gesture toward domestic audiences and 2) hu-

miliate the U.S. in order to weaken its position in mutual negotiations, knowing that Washington may not be in the position to retaliate.

In the days following Fogle's detention, the ambassador Michael McFaul was summoned to the Foreign Ministry (which issued an official statement mentioning 'provocative actions'). However, senior Russian officials including Foreign Minister Lavrov or Putin's foreign policy adviser Yuri Ushakov later underplayed the affair. For its part, Washington does indeed remain silent and apparently still, even as a FSB officer interviewed on Russian television ("inadvertently") revealed the name of the CIA section chief – an unprecedented breach in the mutual relations of the established informal rules of espionage. (In words of the U.S. State Department, "we still feel that we have a very strong positive relationship..."). So it seems that – unless some other, entirely obscured games are being played in the shadows – the Putin regime scored a tactical victory, demonstrating that while he may feel less secure domestically, the regime can certainly act confidently in great power politics. But the relations will soon return to the business as usual.

For the EU, which is stepping up efforts to protect itself from cyber threats that today include malicious cyberespionage networks such as the recently detected "Red October" targeting government agencies as well as corporate and research entities, the episode is a reminder that the conventional spy war is far from over. After all, only a few months ago the chief of Belgian internal security agency (VSSE) Alan Winants told the press that in Brussels espionage by Russian or Chinese intelligence services is "at the same level as [during] the Cold War."